

Shabbat Shira 5776

I'd like to begin by sharing with you a quotation by the great Leonard Bernstein. In a speech on "Varese, Koussevitzky (the violinist), and New Music" he said the following:

"...In the beginning was the Note, and the Note was with God; and whosoever can reach for that Note, reach high, and bring it back to us on earth, to our earthly ears - he is a composer, and to the extent of his reach, partakes of the divine."

Bernstein was not a particularly religious man, but he realized that music—even a single note—has a dimension of divinity, of godliness.

Today we celebrate Shabbat Shira, the Shabbat of Song, so named because it is on this week each year that we read *parashat Beshallah* which includes the Song of the Sea, and so it has become a tradition in synagogues around the world to put a special emphasis on the music of the service over the course of this Shabbat and perhaps the entire weekend.

We know that music is one of the most powerful forces in the universe; it has the ability to transcend time and space, transporting us to far-away places and

bringing back memories of years gone by. And while each of us is affected individually by the music we hear, the music at the same time has the capacity to create a sense of community. As the great poet Robert Browning said, one “Who hears music, feels his solitude Peopled at once.” And I think that is precisely why the Song of the Sea, recited daily, and this Shabbat Shira, celebrated annually, have such a special place in the heart of the Jewish People.

The freedom from Egyptian bondage was both a communal and an individual experience. While we left Egypt en masse, surely each Israelite had his or her own sense of what this freedom meant – the anticipation, the fear, the excitement, the anxiety – all of this was based on the individual experience of what slavery meant. And at the same time, there was this communal experience – even God recognized the power of communal emotion in God’s decision to take the Israelites the “long way” so that communal fear of warfare would not scare them into submitting to the Egyptian army and returning to a life of enslavement.

Fast forward a few verse in the parsha, though, and we have this amazing scene on the other side of the sea. The people, so excited and so grateful to have been saved from the Egyptian army and to finally be free, broke out in song of praise and of thanksgiving, recalling the might of God. There was no big speech on a

mountain, nor was there any great firework display in the sky; it was the overflowing emotion that led the people of Israel to sing and dance and rejoice. And we have been singing ever since. Even as the first Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. and we cried as Nebuchadnezzar's army destroyed the center of our spiritual universe, we did so in song, as recorded in the book of Psalms.

So central to our prayer experience is music that the music of the service often dictates the service itself. As we studied together on *erev selichot*, one of the major reasons the Kol Nidre text remains in our Yom Kippur liturgy is because the rabbis recognized that the mournful melody that has been used to chant Kol Nidre for over a thousand years is so deep a part of our *neshomas* that we cannot eliminate it without changing the experience drastically. As well, *nusach ha-tefillah*, the prescribed musical prayer modes, act as a sort of clock by which a Jew can walk into a synagogue in a strange place and know not only which service (*shacharit, mincha or maariv*) is being davened, but if it is a festival day, Shabbat, a regular weekday or other occasion.

These melodies are part of our souls. They bring us comfort and solace in a world in which we are constantly surrounded by noise. They connect us to our past and

give us hope for our future. Put simply by Confucius, “Music produces a kind of pleasure that human nature cannot do without.”

We too often hear talk of the decline of Conservative Judaism—that our school enrollments are down, that our kids are less knowledgeable, that our sanctuaries are emptier—and while I am not saying that this isn’t the case in perhaps other communities, I will say that we have so much to celebrate and to look forward to here at Beth El. If you were here last night you heard our first group of young *baalei tefillah* as they joined me in leading the melodies and prayers of Kabbalat Shabbat. That is a fantastic accomplishment, and we should be celebrating! And during musaf you will join with me and members of the community who gather each week late in the evening to prepare beautiful music as our congregational choir makes its Shabbat debut. That we have such dedicated and talented men and women in our congregation who desire to enhance the prayer experience for us all is something to celebrate.

And tonight we will be regaled by the talents of nearly eighty college students from around the country, Jewish and not, as they show us why our future looks so bright and why Jewish music is so very important as a way to strengthen and build community.

I want to close with the following: The human voice is perhaps the strongest tool and the strongest weapon in existence. It can be used to divide or to unify; to declare war or to cry out for peace; to curse or to praise; to scream or to bring sweet melody to the world. Judaism teaches us that we must always be conscious of not only what we put in to our mouths, but what we allow to come out of our mouths. May we always use our voices for good, for peace, and may we always find reason to sing. And let us say, amen.